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The Dilemma of Unacknowledged Sexual Harassment on SIU's Campus

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Running Head: Sexual Harassment

ABSTRACT

There is a problem within the arena of sexual harassment that deals with the low rate of reporting such harassment. Low reports could mean that victims don't even acknowledge that they have been sexually harassed. This study deals directly with this phenomenon. Other studies show that only 50% of the women in any given sample report being victims of sexually harassing experiences but only 5% of those women actually report being sexually harassed (Fitzgerald, 1988). It was hypothesized that the status of the perpetrator would positively predict victim's likelihood of claiming to be sexually harassed but this was found to be unsupported. It was also hypothesized that older more than younger respondents, women more than men, single more than married, and minorities more than nonminorities acknowledge being sexually harassed. But most of these were also found unsupported by the data. The only evidence supported is that women more than men acknowledge being sexually harassed. The implications of this study direct us toward more research on the issue of sexual harassment.

As the work place becomes diverse, so too does the situations that arise within them. With more and more women being represented in the working world they are challenged with obstacles everyday. One of those obstacles is sexual harassment in the workplace and women today are becoming the victims. As part of the new revolution sexual harassment has found its place in psychological literature. Now that we know sexual harassment exists, and at alarming rates, we need to find ways to deal with it. But in order to solve a problem we need to acknowledge that a problem exists.

Studies show that around 50% of women in any given sample report being victims of sexually harassing experiences but only 5% of those women actually report having been sexually harassed (Fitzgerald, 1988). Before we can expect to increase the rate of reporting sexual harassment, we need to increase people's readiness to acknowledge that they have in fact been sexually harassed. This study addresses the question, "why don't victims acknowledge that they have been sexually harassed?"

Past research on perceptions of sexual harassment has examined factors that influence observers' likelihood of labeling an event as sexual harassment. This research has found that gender seems to play a major role in perceptions of harassment. Because women are more likely to experience sexual harassment than men, women perceive a wider range of social-sexual behaviors to be sexually harassing than do men (Terpstra & Baker, 1991). There are five levels of sexual harassment that have been used to categorize the levels of sexual harassment. Ranging from least to most severe these categories are: (1) gender harassment, generalized sexist remarks and behavior. (2) seduction, inappropriate and offensive sanction free sexual advances, (3) sexual bribery, solicitation of sexual activity or other sex-linked behavior by promise of rewards. (4) sexual coercion, coercion of sexual activity by threat of punishment, and (5) sexual imposition, gross sexual imposition or assault. According to the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire administered by Fitzgerald et al (1988), men, on the average, perceive events at each of these levels less harassing than women. In addition, Pryor (1985), reports that men rate hypothetical scenarios as less harassing than women. The most noticeable difference lies in the second category, seduction. Seduction involves unwanted discussion or requests for romantic sexual relationships. Men seem to be

more comfortable than women about this type of behavior. Stockdale (1993) indicates that men more than women have a tendency to perceive sexual intention from women's friendly behavior. Another factor that may influence the rate of acknowledgement of sexual harassment may be the severity of the incident. According to Fitzgerald et al (1988) the less severe the incident the less likely it is considered to be sexual harassment. Terpstra and Baker (1991), report that the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board found that as the severity of the incident decreased so did the respondent's view of sexual harassment. In this survey, 99% of respondent's indicated that uninvited pressure for sexual favors constituted sexual harassment. In contrast, 72% of the sample said that uninvited sexual teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions constituted sexual harassment (Terpstra & Baker, 1991).

The status of the offender often lends a hand in determining whether or not an event is labeled sexually harassing. Pryor (1985), suggested that behavior is more likely to be judged as harassment if the perpetrator is of higher status than the victim, compared to when the perpetrator and the victim are of the same status. Harassment can be considered an abuse of power since those in higher positions naturally have more power than his/her subordinates. In contrast, other studies have typically

found that perpetrators are much more likely to be peers or co-workers than persons with explicit power over the victim (Pryor, 1985). It is interesting to note that the more powerful the perpetrator is perceived by the victim, the more likely the perpetrator's behavior will be perceived as sexually harassing (Pryor, 1985). Could this belief place those in higher positions at a higher risk for being accused of sexual harassment? This question should be considered when we readily place the blame on a perpetrator based on his or her position.

Another factor affecting perceptions is the duration or frequency of the offending behavior. The U.S Merit Systems of Protection Board (1981), found that when victims of sexual harassment did acknowledge the sexually harassing incidences as sexual harassment, the incidences persisted for a period of time and most for more than six months (Pryor, 1985). The longer the incidents continue the more likely the subjects are to perceive the event as sexually harassing. The aforementioned factors have been found to correlate with the perceptions of sexual harassment: gender, severity & duration of incident, and the status of the offender. But all these factors could lose credibility if they are not coming from the most valid source. In this case that source would be the actual victim.

What researchers need to be aware of is the fact that there may be differences in the way the lay person views sexual harassment and the way the actual victim perceives it. We may need to stop and ask ourselves if we would come up with the same findings if more research was done on how the victim perceives the events in question. An observer might feel that the victim is to blame, when of course the victim may not agree. More studies should be conducted to find if there are significant differences between observer's and victim's perceptions of the same events.

Most research is done using scenarios or videotapes since it may be difficult or even unethical to place the subject in situations depicted in the scenarios or videotapes. Pryor, (1985), for example, created scenarios in which actor characteristics and attributional factors (consensus: similar behavior by others toward the same target; distinctiveness: behavior of actor toward other targets; and consistency: actor is consistent with behavior over time) were varied. He found that observers perceive an event as harassment when the actor (perpetrator) had harassed in the past (high consistency), acted alone (low consensus), and made similar comments to the target and to other women (low distinctiveness) (Pryor, 1985). He also found that the highest

harassment ratings occurred when a professor consistently made similar comments to the target and to other women (Pryor, 1985). Another study by Dougherty, Olson, Turban, Dwyer, and LaPreze (1992), found that men's potentially harassing behavior toward a woman was evaluated negatively when it involved verbal comments, when the two involved did not know each other, when the event occurred in a work setting, and when the harasser was a supervisor or executive.

Despite consensus in the literature on factors influencing observer's perceptions of harassment, little research has examined how victims of harassment label their own experience. For example, research examined victim's and non-victim's perceptions of blame (Jensen & Gutek, 1982). All women were posed with the statement "Women who are asked by men at work to engage in sexual relations could have done something to prevent it", 62% agreed to the statement, but of those women, 74%, were non-victims. Indicating that the non-harassed have different perceptions as the harassed of the same event. Overall, among women, victims are less likely than others to blame women for being sexually harassed.

Stockdale & Vaux (1993), obtained data from a survey from undergraduates, graduates, and university staff to investigate what leads individuals to acknowledge having

been sexually harassed. They hypothesized that acknowledgment would be related to gender of respondent and the severity of the incident but the study failed to support those hypotheses. Sexual seduction was shown to be the most acknowledged type of sexual harassment. Thus, the original hypothesis that the more severe the incident the more likely subjects will acknowledge the experience is false, and we will retain the null hypothesis. Furthermore, women were not more likely than men to acknowledge sexual harassment. The results of the Stockdale and Vaux study also imply evidence that observers' perceptions may not always generalize to how victims perceive their own experience. This fact should be taken into consideration when trying to understand the victims view of sexual harassment.

The present study examines processes that may explain how victims label their own sexually harassing experiences. Specifically, the study examines victim's labeling of their experience as sexual harassment. Models that were tested were derived from literature on observer's perceptions of sexual harassment, thus this study examines the plausibility of these models for explaining victim's perceptions. One model is called the power model. What this model asserts is that a relationship exists between the

power of the perpetrator and the victim's acknowledgement of the experience as sexual harassment. Studies of observers find that offensive behaviors perpetrated by higher status perpetrators is more likely to be considered sexually harassing than the same behavior perpetrated by equal-status perpetrators. Hypothesis one states that status of victim's perpetrator will positively predict victim's likelihood of claiming to be sexually harassed.

Another model is the personal characteristics model. This model asserts that each victim has certain personal characteristics that influence how they perceive sexual harassment. This model implies that certain people are likely to be more sensitive to harassment than others. Characteristics of observer's, such as gender, age, organizational status, and attitudes toward women have been found to predict perceptions of sexual harassment. More specifically, pro-feminist women who have been harassed in the past and minorities are also likely to acknowledge sexually harassing experiences. Pro-feminists are more likely to label events sexually harassing because they take an interest in women's rights; those who have previously been harassed because they probably have developed skills to deal with the situation; and minorities because they may be more acutely aware of being victimized. Thus hypothesis two states that factors affecting victim's sensitivity

to the issue of sexual harassment will predict their labeling of their experience as sexual harassment. Specifically, it is predicted that acknowledging harassment will be highest among women, older than younger respondents, and among those with a greater propensity to view ambiguous situations as sexual harassment. Lastly, marital status is predicted to correlate with sexually harassing experiences. Stockdale (993), reported that unmarried individuals are sexually harassed more than married individuals.

What this study hopes to accomplish is to better understand what factors play an important role in understanding the difference between the victim and observers perceptions of sexual harassment and how those factors influence the acknowledgement of sexual harassment. Of 448 women in a sample only 3% attempted to report the experience (Fitzgerald, 1988). It is felt that once we have a better understanding on these issues we will be able to generate some answers to why sexual harassment is reported at such low rates when clearly many people have experienced events that constitute sexual harassment.

METHODS

A secondary analysis is conducted using data from results of the original study by Ashin, Stockdale, & Shearer (1993). The methods will be reported as they were executed in the original study.

Subjects

Subjects were undergraduate males and females recruited from General Education courses at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The classes were selected so that at least 20% of the classes had junior and senior enrollment in order to ensure representativeness of sample. The total N was 572 (316 male and 233 female, 23 did not state their gender).

Materials

Three instruments were reviewed to construct the survey used in the study. They were the United States Merit Systems Protection Board's 1981 and 1988 instruments and Martindale's 1988 Department of Defense Sexual Harassment Survey. These surveys were chosen because they provided a simple but comprehensive assessment of

sexual harassment experiences. The survey developed for this study was closely modeled after Martindale's survey. Also added to the survey were open-ended questions regarding the SIUC sexual harassment policy and training program.

There were four sections on the survey and each measured a different aspect. The first section attempted to estimate the prevalence of sexual harassment experiences at SIUC through questions relating to the different categories of sexual harassment: gender harassment, seduction, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual imposition. The frequency and distress of events were also measured and finally the question "Have you been sexually harassed was asked." The next section was to be answered only if the respondent indicated experiencing at least one of the offensive behaviors listed in the first section of the survey. These questions went into detail about the most "distressing" experience. The response scale for the questions included three categories: frequency—never to once a week or more; distress—not at all to very distressing; and by whom—professor, graduate T.A., work supervisor, co-worker, another student, or other. Other questions in this section deal with perceptions of sexual harassment at SIUC in the respondent's department, information where the event took place, the effectiveness of taking action, and the effects of the

experience. The third section deals with hypothetical scenarios to assess respondents attitudes about sexual harassment. Next, categories of action that could be taken were measured. In the fourth section issues regarding the sexual harassment policy at SIUC was assessed. These questions were taken from another small survey given by Personnel employees about issues of concern at SIUC. The last section elicited the demographic information.

Procedures

The instructors of the General Education courses were contacted and asked to participate in the study. They understood that participation would entail the researchers coming to one of their class periods to administer the survey. In order to eliminate self-selection bias the surveys were administered in person to the subjects to increase the response rate. Subjects were not informed by their professors that the survey would be administered on that particular day. Approximately 95% of the students present in class on the day of the administration participated in the study which took approximately 45 minutes.

RESULTS

The hypotheses in this study were analyzed using chi-square statistics and the t-test. Hypothesis one states

that the status of the victim's perpetrator will positively predict victims' likelihood to be sexually harassed. This hypothesis is a result of the power model. The power model asserts that people harass others by misusing their organizational position (Stockdale, 1993). Those of higher position are more likely to harass those in subordinate positions. Since men typically hold more powerful positions than women, men are more likely to harass and women are more likely to be harassed (Stockdale, 1993). The status of the perpetrator was determined by creating variables representing most people who fall into the academic structure. Those variables are: PROF (professor), SUPER (student's supervisor), GTA (graduate T.A.), COWORKER, STUDENT, and OTHER-for those who did not fit any other category. In order to examine how these power variables correlated with acknowledgement of sexual harassment, a t-test was used to correlate acknowledgement of harassment by each of the power variables. Two groups were created to distinguish acknowledgers (group 1) from nonacknowledgers (group 2). To find the correlation between the power variables and harassment acknowledged, we took the acknowledgement variable by prof, coworker, super, etc. I predicted that respondents who were harassed by professors supervisors, and GTA's would be more likely to acknowledge being sexually harassed than respondents harassed by coworkers

or other students. Thus, I predict acknowledgement to be related to professor, supervisor, and GTA harassers, but not to coworker and student harassers. T-tests were conducted in each of the harasser type variables with each of the two groups of victims. Significant differences were found on GTA. ($t = -2.45$, $p < .05$), coworker ($t = -2.81$, $p < .01$), and students ($t = -3.58$, $p < .001$). Except for GTA, these findings do not confirm the hypothesis regarding status of the offender. In general, victims were more likely to acknowledge being sexually harassed by an equal-status offender, than by a higher-status offender. See table 2.

Hypothesis two states that factors affecting victims' sensitivity to harassment, such as gender, age, race, and marital status will predict their labeling of their experience as sexual harassment. Thus, I predict that women more than men, older more than younger respondents, minorities more than nonminorities, and those not married more than those married, will acknowledge being sexually harassed. These predictions are in support of the personal characteristics model which asserts that individuals with certain characteristics will lead to acknowledgement of sexually harassing experiences. It was found that 76% of the female victims acknowledge sexual harassment compared to 24% of the male victims ($x = 23.89$, $p < .001$). The mean age of those who do not acknowledge sexual harassment, 21, and

the mean age of those who do, 20, (t = 1.48) was insignificant. Thus, the hypothesis that older victims acknowledge harassment more than younger was unfounded. Of the three races: White, Black, & Asian, Whites acknowledges sexual harassment more than Asians (white 21% vs, Asians 13%), and Asians acknowledge sexual harassment more than Blacks (Asians 13% vs Blacks 3%). Acknowledgement rates were significantly different among these groups (x = 6.90, p < .05), but the pattern of results do not support the hypothesis that minorities would acknowledge sexual harassment more than nonminorities. There is no relationship between marital status and acknowledgement of sexual harassment (married 8%; not married 19%, x = 1.27 [with continuity correction} ns). See table 1.

Subjects rated scenarios on a scale of 0-8: 0 = not at all harassing, 8 = clearly harassing. There was no significant difference on these ratings between those who acknowledged and those who did not acknowledge sexually harassing experiences Scenario one (t = -1.57, ns), and scenario two (t = -1.66, ns). See table 2.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to attempt to answer the question "why don't victims acknowledge that they have

been sexually harassed?" Once we are able to answer this, we may begin to put a dent in solving, or at least lessening, the occurrence of sexual harassment. Most of our results are not in support of the two main hypothesis.

Sexual harassment is a growing issue in the work force today. If those involved with such experiences do not acknowledge them as sexual harassment we will never understand or begin to help curb its' prevalence. An attempt was made in this study to look at both the lay person's view of sexual harassment, as past research has done and the actual victims perceptions of sexual harassment. This is one area which receives little attention, and with more focus could reveal interesting findings.

It was hypothesized that the power of the perpetrator would play a role in acknowledgement of sexual harassment. The higher status the perpetrator, the more likely a student would acknowledge sexual harassment. The results show that this was not significant. In fact, acknowledgement was related to reports of being harassed by other students, GTA's, and coworkers. The only result that somewhat supports the power model is the fact that students were harassed by GTA's, which have some power over undergraduate students. The literature on lay person's perceptions of sexual harassment indicate that an experience would be labeled sexual harassment it if was

perpetrated on a student by a professor because of his or her status. According to Pryor (1985), surveys show that the more powerful the perpetrator, the more likely the perpetrator's behavior will be perceived as sexually harassing. But, our data on victims' perceptions do not concur.

Again, the personal characteristics model states that people with certain characteristics will make them more apt to acknowledge sexual harassment. The characteristics dealt with in the context of this study are sex, age, marital status, and ethnicity. The prediction was that older respondents would acknowledge harassment more than younger respondents. The mean age of those who acknowledge being harassed was predicted to be higher than those who did not, but this was unsupported. The age of the respondent plays no role in predicting acknowledgement of harassment. Marital status was yet another factor that was predicted to correlate with acknowledgement. It is believed that women who are single, divorced, or separated are more likely to experience harassment than women who are married (Terpstra & Baker, 1991). The results of this study show that married women were no less likely to acknowledge sexual harassment than women who are single, divorced, or separated. Ethnicity is another factor dealing with the acknowledgement of sexual harassment. With race,

samples were taken from Whites, Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, American Indians, and others. But due to a limited number of respondents in the Hispanic, American Indian, and other categories, they were dropped from the analysis. The groups that were included were Whites, Blacks, and Asians. It is felt that minorities would acknowledge sexual harassment more than nonminorities because minorities are more acutely aware of what it is like to be victimized. But the results show that Whites acknowledged harassment at a much higher rate than both Blacks and Asians. The ratio of minority respondents to nonminority respondents could be a factor in the outcome of this statistic. There is a larger number of nonminority respondents which could lead to a greater diversity of nonminority respondents. It could happen that a lot of the nonminority respondents were more sensitive to sexual harassment, while the small sample of minority respondents could consist of those who are not sensitive to the issue of sexual harassment. One last and only fully supported factor dealing with acknowledgement is the correlation between gender and acknowledgement. Females more than males acknowledge sexually harassing experiences. This could be for many reasons. First, it is rare that a female would approach a male in a sexual way. When this does happen, the male would consider it a complement rather than sexual harassment. Stockdale (1993), suggests

that "women and men do not consistently interpret social-sexual behaviors the same". Male observers interpret women's behavior as being more sexually motivated (Stockdale, 1993). What current research suggest is that men and women do not perceive potentially sexually harassing situations the same. While men may see a potentially harassing situation as flattering, a woman may perceive the same situation as sexual harassment.

Two scenarios were used in the questionnaire to evaluate the differences between those who acknowledge vs. those who do not acknowledge sexual harassment. The respondent was to indicate how sexually harassing they thought the scenarios were, and no significant difference was found between the two. It was believed that acknowledgers compared to nonacknowledgers would be more likely to rate ambiguous scenarios as sexually harassing. One explanation for this could be that the scenarios included in the survey were different from their own experiences. Their own experiences may have been quite different from those described in the hypothetical scenarios, such that they did not see the scenarios as harassing. These findings also indicate that acknowledgers are not merely "oversensitive" individuals.

Further research should be done on victims' perceptions of sexual harassment to reveal how they feel

about harassment. When a study such as this is conducted, a larger sample from minority groups should be used to help understand how different cultures react to the issue of sexual harassment. With a larger sample, findings may show a trend that race or cultural groups differ in acknowledgement of sexual harassment. Since those involved in sexual harassment issues suffer enumerable consequences from the experiences, more steps should be taken to eliminate its' prevalence. Sexual harassment policies should also be implemented and enforced, to ensure that proper action is being taken against the perpetrators. The low percentage of acknowledgement could be a direct cause of the low rate of reports of sexual harassment. With low reports it would seem that it does not exist, and if it is assumed to not exist, nothing will be done to stop it. So, unless more research is done on the topic, there will begin a never ending cycle of the sexual harassment issue. In conclusion, it seems that the only concrete evidence researchers have found is that harassers tend to be males. Partial support of the power model was found in that GTA's do exert a small amount of power over students, and students do acknowledge sexual harassment perpetrated by GTA's. Other than this finding, the power model holds little truth when scientifically tested. The hypothesis involving personal characteristics could stand more rigorous testing to examine why it is believed that older

respondents, minorities, and single women are more likely to acknowledge sexual harassment. So, the question still stands as to why victim's do not acknowledge sexually harassing experiences as sexual harassment. With more research and vigorous testing the answer to this question will be found.

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Table 1

Percentage of individuals acknowledging sexual harassment, and chi-square broken down by sex, marital status and ethnicity.

Variable	% Acknowledged	Chi-Square	P
Sex		23.88	.001
male	8.7		
female	28.7		
Marital Status		1.26	NS
married	18.5		
not married	7.7		
Ethnicity		6.89	.05
Whites	21.4		
Asians	13.3		
Blacks	3.1		

Table 2

Means and t-tests for acknowledgers and nonacknowledgers on age, scenario ratings, and type of harasser.

Variable	Mean Not Acknowledge	Acknowledge	T-test	P
Personal Characteristics Model				
Age	21.43	20.74	1.48	NS
Scen 1	3.54	3.80	-1.57	NS
Scen 2	4.54	4.73	-1.66	NS
Power Model				
Professor	.07	.21	-1.56	NS
Supervisor	.10	.38	-2.45	$p < .05$
GTA	.08	.18	-1.22	NS
Coworker	.07	.32	-2.81	$p < .01$
Student	1.84	2.80	-3.58	$p < .001$
Other	.42	.54	- .87	NS